



**Judicial Branch of Arizona
in Maricopa County
Media Relations Office
Old Courthouse
125 W. Washington
Phoenix, Arizona 85003-2205
602.506.7570**

"Committed to the Timely, Fair and Impartial Administration of Justice"

3/21/2006

Contact: Karen Arra, Public Information Officer
602.506.7570 Pager: 602.420.8951

SUPERIOR COURT TO SHOWCASE MENTAL HEALTH COURT PROGRAM AT NATIONAL CONFERENCE

The Superior Court's nationally recognized Comprehensive Mental Health Court will be showcased during the GAINS Conference, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in Boston on April 6th.

Superior Court Commissioner Michael Hintze and Probation Officer Steven Lessard will be presenting on behalf of the Court along with other agencies of the Comprehensive Mental Health Court team.

The Comprehensive Mental Health Court was developed in response to the growing number of serious mentally ill people coming into contact with the criminal justice system. The focus of the Comprehensive Mental Health Court is to identify those eligible for treatment, work collaboratively with service agencies to provide treatment and services, and oversee compliance with treatment orders. This approach avoids additional civil commitments and arrests and reduces the costs associated with incarceration.

Many inmates who suffer from mental illness are incarcerated, in large part, as a result of inadequate community services, treatment and housing. More than 16 percent of the 4,000 individuals arrested and booked into jail each month show signs and symptoms of mental illness. Many create a backlog due to the inability to post bond, having nowhere to live, and not receiving mental health services.

In the late 90's, the Court along with several community agencies began to develop areas in which it could assist seriously mentally ill offenders. A Mental Health Probation Court was established where seriously mentally ill defendants were subject to treatment orders and monitoring.

Under the vision of then Presiding Probate and Mental Health Judge and now Presiding Judge Barbara Rodriguez Mundell, a more comprehensive program was formed. To achieve better efficiency in case processing and to increase the tools the Court needs to effectively address and oversee each individual case, the criminal cases involving mental health individuals were consolidated with the probate and civil commitment proceedings.

“The Comprehensive Mental Health Court allows the Court to problem-solve collaboratively with other treatment and service agencies,” Mundell said. “Having just one department of the Court oversee the management of seriously mentally ill cases increases communications between the Judicial Officers and provides for earlier therapeutic intervention.”

The Comprehensive Mental Health Court team includes a judge, probation officer, deputy public defender, deputy county attorney, treatment provider, correctional health officials, and a court monitor in some cases. Each team member brings to the table his or her expertise in assessing an individual’s mental health needs and developing a corresponding plan.

The current Presiding Probate and Mental Health Judge Karen O’Connor said the team approach to treatment increases the individual’s success and therefore makes this a successful program.

“We are looking forward to this opportunity to share the development and objectives of our Comprehensive Mental Health Court with other courts and agencies at the upcoming conference,” O’Connor said.

###